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SUBJECT: AMERICAN CULTURE AND COMMERCE FESTIVAL IN ABHA,  
NOVEMBER 25-28, 2007

REF: JEDDAH 00512

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: With the goals of engaging broader, younger and harder-to-reach audiences outside of the Kingdom's major cities and educating Saudis about U.S. culture, education and commercial partnerships, the U.S. Consulate General Jeddah Public Affairs Section planned and conducted a four-day American Culture and Commerce Festival in Abha, in partnership with the Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The heavily-attended event featured a gala VIP opening, English teacher training workshops, presentations on study in the U.S. and visas, panel discussions, Foreign Commercial Service presentations to local businesses, art workshops for youth, photo and art exhibitions, multimedia informational displays, an American documentary film series and musical performances. The festival ended with a large, public concert performed jointly by an American music group and a traditional Saudi dance troupe. Local officials estimated festival attendance at 8,000 people, with over 1,200 students participating. National and regional media coverage was extensive and overwhelmingly positive. END SUMMARY.

TWO YEARS IN THE MAKING: INSPIRATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE FESTIVAL

¶2. (U) The idea for the "American Culture and Commerce Festival" originated during a meeting between Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller and then Governor of Aseer, HRH Prince Khalid bin Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (who is now Governor of the Makkah Region). Together the Consul General and HRH Prince Khalid began developing the idea and initial planning for the festival. Patronage and support for the festival were then continued by the newly appointed Governor of the region, HRH Prince Faisal bin Khalid bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. The Abha Chamber of Commerce also supported and facilitated the festival organization, as did other local partners developed throughout the planning process. Finally, after almost two years of planning and preparation, the festival was held November 25-28, 2007.

PARTNERSHIP: PUTTING ON A FESTIVAL AND DEVELOPING NEW FRIENDSHIPS

¶3. (U) Planning and conducting a festival of this nature would not have been possible without the positive existing relationships, and ones recently developed, between Consulate General Jeddah and local Saudi partners. The base for this partnership began long before the idea of hosting such a festival was even suggested. Thanks to groundwork previously laid in Abha by former Fulbright participants, touring American photography exhibitions and other cultural programs, and the Jeddah Public Affairs Section's close relationship with the editors of the Abha-based national newspaper, Al-Watan, the project's development was supported by Aseeri

institutions and authorities despite the area's reputed conservatism.

¶4. (U) Among the most positive aspects of this event were the new cooperative relationships forged between the Consulate General and local institutions. This festival was conducted in partnership with the Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Jeddah Public Affairs worked in close collaboration with the Chamber throughout the planning stages of the event. The Assir branch of the Ministry of Education also provided key support, selecting 120 local English teachers to participate in a three-day teacher workshop and facilitating an art workshop for local schoolchildren. In addition, Consulate General Jeddah was fortunate to have the generous support of a local General Motors distributor, Universal Motors Agencies, which provided both the space for the event and the services of a local Saudi advertising company. Consulate General Jeddah and the Public Affairs Section in particular spent countless hours planning and conducting the festival alongside these partners. The end result was not only a successful event, but strengthened work relationships and new, genuine personal friendships.

#### DANCING TO "THE TWIST": FOUR DAYS OF MUSIC, ART, COMMERCE, AND CULTURE

¶5. (U) The festival opened on November 25, 2007 with a VIP ceremony attended by the Consul General, Deputy Governor of Aseer Doctor Abdulaziz Al-Khedheiri, the American and Saudi planning teams, and invited dignitaries and guests. The Board Chairman of the Abha Chamber of Commerce, a representative of Universal Motors Agencies and the Consul General delivered remarks, followed by a multimedia presentation on the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, live traditional Aseeri dancing, and a formal dinner

reception. The Consul General also hosted a coffee discussion with twenty prominent Aseeri women the following morning.

The next three days of the festival were open to the public, and included:

- multimedia informational displays and free materials in Arabic and English on facets of American education, government, commerce, sports, arts and culture, and religious and ethnic diversity;
- poster shows on American culture, values and history, and photography exhibitions on the American landscape and Native American art;
- an American documentary film series featuring selected videos in Arabic and English, provided by the Office of Broadcast Services (PA/OBS), which ran for the entire festival and included films representing a cross-section of American society and culture;
- informational presentations to local business people by a Foreign Commercial Service representative.

¶6. (U) In addition to the continuously-running events, each day featured special events. The Regional English Language Officer from Cairo led a three-day teacher training workshop for 120 male and female Saudi English language teachers. During one evening, Consular and Public Affairs representatives gave presentations on studying in the U.S. and procedures for applying for a U.S. visa. Saudis who had recently completed study in the U.S. participated in a panel discussion about their experience as students at American institutions. All of these presentations were standing room only. Two special events highlighted the final day of the festival. The first was an art workshop for local Saudi schoolchildren, who drew pictures on the theme of "U.S.-Saudi friendship". One deeply moving picture was drawn by a young boy who depicted the U.S. and Saudi flags facing each other, with a banner above the flags reading, in Arabic, "Cooperate, we are all brothers." American musician and artist Ken Nance participated in the art workshop and shared some of his drawings. The second special event was an evening concert, in which both an American music group (of expatriate

Americans living in the Kingdom) and an Aseeri music-dance group performed to a full house.

#### REACHING OUT TO YOUTH

¶17. (U) One of the central goals of the event was to reach out to the young people of the Aseer region. The festival accomplished this in many ways. First, the American officials and musicians interacted with youth visitors throughout the event, exchanging ideas about America and answering questions on everything from education to art to general life in the U.S. Specific events throughout the event were aimed particularly at youth. Students from local schools and universities were invited by the Ministry of Education in Abha to the education and visa presentations, with over 1,200 students participating. At these presentations young people filled the rooms, listening and following the presenters out into the hall to continue asking more questions after the presentations ended. These presentations were so popular that many students and parents requested on subsequent days of the festival that the sessions be repeated.

¶18. (U) For younger children, in addition to the art workshop there was also a "Children's Corner" table set up in the main exhibition hall, offering popular giveaway items such as Stars and Stripes pencils, pinwheels, lollipops and stickers, mini-soccer balls, and U.S.A.-themed arts and crafts. Throughout the festival, crowds gathered to watch children who had come to the festival with their parents run over to the "Children's Corner" to color the free paper American flags and "U.S.A." baseball caps. The films were also popular with youth, giving them opportunities to view many aspects of American life and culture not seen in the usual Hollywood films shown on satellite television. Finally, a large number of youth attended, and danced at, the joint American-Saudi musical performance that closed the event.

#### "I SAW IT ON TV": THE FESTIVAL IN THE MEDIA

¶19. (U) Media coverage of this event was extensive and overwhelmingly positive. The Consul General's public remarks were warmly received and favorably reported in print and television coverage of the festival opening. Reporters interviewed representatives of the Abha Chamber, the visiting American musicians, participating teachers and businesspeople, and attendees of the various presentations

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and workshops. The Deputy Governor attended three days of the festival, and gave media availability on each day to different television outlets to promote the event's positive message. Print media began coverage in the days leading up to the festival, and continued running reports two full weeks after the event ended. In total, seven nationally-distributed newspapers printed over twenty articles covering the event. Television coverage was similarly widespread. Two national television news channels (Saudi TV and Al-Ikhbariah) and a pan-Arab satellite television news channel (Al-Arabiya) covered all four days of the event and broadcast detailed reports of the various festival functions. Al-Arabiya produced four separate reports, each several minutes long, detailing different aspects of the festival. One particular highlight of many of the television broadcasts was a clip of the musical performance in which Consulate General Jeddah officials, American expatriates, Abha musicians and local Saudi visitors are seen dancing arm-in-arm at the concert's close.

#### "EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT IT": PUBLIC REACTION

¶10. (U) The festival was attended by an estimated 8,000 people over four days. Visitors expressed positive views not only of the festival activities and exhibits, but also of the U.S. Consulate General's efforts to engage with Aseeris in the south of the Kingdom and build bridges to this conservative region. Those who attended clamored for an expansion of U.S.-Saudi cultural and commercial activities in

the future, and the U.S. Consulate General Jeddah has been invited to make the festival an annual event, and to "take it on the road" to other cities in the Western Region. Deputy Governor of Aseer Doctor Abdul Aziz al Khederi summed up the positive reaction and what we could only have hoped for when he relayed the following comment he had heard by many Saudis who had attended the festival:

"Everyone...Saudis and Americans were getting along.... They put on such a nice festival; free for everyone...we don't understand why there is any problem between us."

#### "LET'S DO IT AGAIN SOMETIME": LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE FUTURE

¶11. (U) Throughout the long planning process and during the event itself, Consulate General Jeddah learned a number of lessons that could be beneficial should the festival become annual, or be held in another city, or should another post host an event of a similar nature. First, conducting this event on a limited budget led to creativity -- and success -- of many components of the festival that otherwise could have been prohibitively costly. For example, two ideas developed in the planning stages were to program an American artist and a musical group into the festival. However, bringing a musical group from the U.S. was out of the question due to budget and time constraints. Therefore, the Consulate General reached out to the American expatriate community and was able to find four Americans working locally who play together in a band performing American traditional music. Because the members live in Saudi Arabia, they were able to speak to festival-goers in the local language and give press interviews in Arabic.

¶12. (U) Rather than bringing in visiting speakers from the U.S., employees of the U.S. Mission to Saudi Arabia conducted all of the lectures and presentations on studying in the U.S., U.S. visas, and U.S.-Saudi commercial opportunities. The Regional English Language Officer based in nearby Cairo conducted the English teacher training, which also helped keep costs down. Leveraging Fulbright Alumni connections, Jeddah Public Affairs recruited a panel of Saudis from Abha who had recently studied in the U.S. to participate in a panel discussion for students thinking about studying in the U.S. A Fulbright Alumnus also acted as an intermediary in organizing the art workshop for children -- working with the local schools to identify children to participate -- which helped the Consulate General to avoid complications often encountered with the Ministry of Education and other authorities when trying to work directly with public schools in the Kingdom.

¶13. (U) Finding space for the event presented another challenge. There were no free public venues available in Abha, and the only location with a suitable space was a local hotel that wanted to charge an outrageously high fee for its space. Consulate General Jeddah worked with the Abha Chamber of Commerce to look for sponsors who would be willing to work directly with the hotel to provide the needed facilities. The Chamber located a generous sponsor, which resolved two major issues: first, the sponsor agreed to provide for the space; second, the sponsor and the Chamber of Commerce dealt

directly with the hotel, and this simplified the formal aspects of the sponsorship for the Consulate General considerably.

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